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Johnson
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Point
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By Lyndon B. Johnson: The Tet Offensive

INSTALLMENT VIII

Following is the eighth of 11 installments of excerpts from Lyndon Baines Johnson's memoirs of his Presidential years, which will be published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston on Nov. 1 under the title "The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969":

On March 31, 1968, while sitting at my desk in the White House and facing the shiny eyes of the television cameras, I announced four major decisions. I would not accept my party's nomination as candidate for another term. I was stopping most of the bombing of North Vietnam in the hope that it would lead to peace. I had decided to make the expansion and modernization of South Vietnam's armed forces a goal of even higher priority. Finally, to meet existing needs, I had decided to make a small increase in the size of our own military forces in Vietnam.

Many factors helped to shape those decisions. In describing them, I will also be describing the Presidential decision-making process.

In response to military advice, I had approved an expansion of the bombing program in mid-April of 1967. A proposal suggesting a change in the pattern of air strikes came to me on May 6 when I was spending the weekend at my ranch. On the teletype from the White House, a message from Walt Rostow listed alternate bombing strategies. The first was "closing the top of the funnel," blocking the supply lines through which war matériel moved into North Vietnam: "Under this strategy we would mine the major harbors and, perhaps, bomb port facilities and even consider blockade. In addition, we would attack systematically the rail lines between Hanoi and mainland China." The second strategy involved attacks against what was "inside the funnel," hitting supply dumps, stockpiles and fuel storage areas, as well as bridges, railroad yards and other targets in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. The third strategy would have concentrated our effort on the "bottom of the funnel," the lines of communication and infiltration routes in southern North Vietnam and through Laos. The memo listed the

advantages and disadvantages of each strategy. On balance, Rostow favored the third course, concentrating air strikes in southern North Vietnam and Laos. He recommended keeping the second option open, but he thought we should use it "only when the targets make sense."

Three days later a remarkably similar memo arrived from Bob McNamara and his deputy, Cy Vance, which also listed three broad categories of air offensives and analyzed the pros and cons of each course. This memo concluded:

"We, therefore, recommend that all of the sorties allocated to the Rolling Thunder program [the code name for the air campaign against the North] be concentrated on the lines of communication -- the 'funnel' through which men and supplies to the South must flow -- between 17-20°, reserving the option and intention to strike (in the 20-23° area) as necessary to keep the enemy's investment in defense and in repair crews high throughout the country."

Using the Rostow and McNamara-Vance memos as a basis, the State Department also analyzed our bombing program. A memo prepared in State and dated May 9 reached essentially the same conclusions.

I was receiving quite different views from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from Adm. U.S.G. Sharp, our commander in chief in the Pacific, and from General Westmoreland and his military staff in Saigon. They favored more intensive and extensive bombing in the North. They emphasized the advantages of destroying enemy supplies and equipment in the Hanoi-Haiphong area before those materials were scattered along the roads and infiltration trails.

I decided to steer a course midway between the proposal of those who wanted to cut back our air action and the plan advanced by those who believed we should step up strikes in the North. I felt that a cutback to the 20th parallel at that time would have been misunderstood in Hanoi as a sign of weakness. I also believed that strikes in the Hanoi-Haiphong vicinity were costing more than the results justified. Beginning on May 22, I ordered a halt to air attacks on targets within 10 miles of the North Vietnamese capital. Except for one attack in mid-June, the ban on air action around Hanoi continued until Aug. 9.

In July, 1967, we made another intensive study of our air offensive in the North. I accepted the view of our military leadership that there were a few significant targets that should be hit.

On Aug. 24 we again stopped all air activity in the Hanoi area. This halt was carried out in connection with our efforts to enter peace talks in Paris

through French intermediaries. In this instance, the ban remained in effect for two months.

In April, 1967, General Westmoreland submitted two suggestions for possible troop increases. One called for a "minimum essential force." The other described an "optimum force." The first proposal involved an increase of two and one-third divisions and five air squadrons, about 80,000 men. The second suggested an increase in our forces of four and two-thirds divisions and 10 air squadrons, raising our force level in Vietnam by 200,000, to a total of 680,000 men by July, 1968.

On May 19, 1967, McNamara sent me one of the most detailed memos he had ever submitted. Since I became President, McNamara strongly opposed the proposal for an "optimum force." He thought we should limit the increase to 30,000 men.

July 13 I met with McNamara and Generals Wheeler [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] and Westmoreland in the White House family dining room. McNamara told me that he and the military leaders had conferred all morning and had reached "complete accord" on the question of troop levels. The requirement would be in the neighborhood of 45,000 men, he said, and the approved troop strength in South Vietnam should be raised to 525,000 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1968. After additional study, I approved this proposal.

THE first phase of the Communists' winter-spring offensive began in September, 1967.

As I read the daily reports and followed developments on the ground, I became increasingly concerned for our military command and its men. Westmoreland was becoming more concerned as well. What he wanted most was acceleration of the arrival of the 101st Airborne Division, which was scheduled to go to Vietnam in February, 1968. He also asked for faster deployment of the 11th Infantry Brigade. All my advisers agreed that we should carry out this acceleration.

During this period McNamara made a major proposal for a new course of action. He said that he believed continuation of our current course of action in Southeast Asia would be dangerous, costly and unsatisfactory to our people. At my suggestion, he returned to the Pentagon after the meeting and set down his thoughts in a long memorandum which I received the next day.

McNamara concluded his memorandum with three recommendations. First, he suggested we announce that we were stabilizing our efforts and would

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